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Solex Robotics Systems Opens New Facility

Solex Robotics Systems, Inc., cut the ribbon May 12 as it officially opened its new facility in Idaho Falls that will manufacture and market a new robotic tank inspection system. This new technology is expected to have a major impact on the petroleum storage industry and pollution control globally.

Solex Robotics, an Idaho Falls-based company, will produce the system that relies on a robot, "Maverick," to inspect the integrity of tank walls and seams. The robot can be submerged into a full tank of petroleum or chemicals, and through the use of remote control, ultrasonic signals and an internal camera, Maverick can spot minor corrosion and degraded welds much more efficiently and cost effectively than the human eye.

The new technology was developed in partnership with the Department of Energy and Lockheed Martin Idaho Technologies Company.

The new facility is near the INEEL in the Bonneville County Technology Center on North Boulevard. Solex's presence could have a significant impact on both Idaho Falls and the state at large. It will mean more jobs; four Solex engineers are presently employed at the new facility, but that number is expected to increase six fold within the next five years in the areas of research and development, product design, electrical and mechanical engineering and technical support. Solex expects to employ 200 workers worldwide by the year 2002.

Solex will also add to the area's economic diversity. Annual Maverick sales and service revenues are projected to reach $5 to $8 million within the next five years, with worldwide projections expected at $100 million. Solex plans to use local vendors whenever possible, having already linked up with local manufacturing companies to design and build Maverick components. Blackfoot Brass, a company founded by a former INEEL engineer, was awarded the contract to forge the pressurized Maverick housing. The technology-based businesses that surround the INEEL will become primary suppliers to the company as it builds its future in Idaho. And Solex hopes to expand its revenue base in Idaho through acquiring other technologies from the INEEL and future research and development.

Because of its relationship with the INEEL, Solex is a prime example of technology transfer, a partnership between government and private industry. According to Solex President Don Hartsell, the company is no stranger to technology transfer. Solex and the U.S. Department of Transportation became partners in 1985 to develop methods of escalating the drying process for in-port merchant marine chemical tanks. Two years later, Solex joined forces with NASA to successfully restore 97 percent of all the books salvaged from a fire that swept through the City of Los Angeles Central Public Library.

This was the largest successful restoration of books in the country's history. Solex has also served as a consultant on restorations of the Windsor Castle in England and Hofburg Palace in Austria. Hartsell has testified twice before congressional subcommittees about the importance of technology transfer and

partnerships between federal laboratories and private industry.

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